

Latham carries barges' water

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There's skulduggery afoot.

Entrenched special interests are again fighting changes in the way the Corps of Engineers manages the Missouri River. And this year, Iowa Congressman Tom Latham is carrying the water for lowlands farmers and barge owners.

During U.S. House subcommittee consideration of the 2002 Energy and Water Development appropriations bill, Latham inserted a "rider" that blocks spending for revision of the "Missouri River Master Water Control Manual" if the document includes plans for a "spring rise."

Missouri Senator Christopher Bond inserted a similar rider into the 2001 water appropriations bill, hoping to prevent changes in Corps' operation of the six big dams along the Missouri. President Bill Clinton vetoed the entire appropriations bill, in part because of the rider. After it was stripped from the legislation, Clinton signed it.

Latham's rider is similar to Bond's earlier effort. In justifying it, Latham labeled agriculture and barge industry interests as "victims." In reality, upstream states and the environment have suffered under current river management. There was little concern for environmental impact when the 40-year-old management plan was instituted. As a result, the least tern, piping plover and pallid sturgeon were nearly wiped out. Revising these outdated river-management practices should reverse at least some of that damage.

Farmers who till marginal lowlands are fearful increases in the spring river flow will flood or slow drainage of their property. Even Chad Smith, American Rivers' Missouri River field-house director, agrees those concerns should be addressed.

"However, the Corps has completed a study of the interior drainage issue that shows most farmers along the lower Missouri River would benefit from the changes recommended by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and accepted by the Corps," Smith said. "The anticipated spring rise is not high enough to cause any more problems than they experience now. The summer low flow would allow them to drain off rain events better than they can now because the Corps keeps river levels high to support navigation."

Commercial barge traffic is one of the congressionally authorized objectives of Corps Missouri River management. But navigation interests have long demanded more water than they are worth. Why should a \$7-million-a-year business claim primacy over an upstream recreation and sporting industry that generates \$86 million a year?

If the new management plan is adopted and it kills the barge industry, barge owners have said they will take the Corps to court. That fight could and should be avoided with a federal buyout. And some barge owners have said they're open to such a proposal.

Latham has said the "mandated flood plan forced upon the residents along the Missouri River is a risky scheme that simply should not be pursued." His premise is countered by Tom Gangerke, Iowa Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist.

In a letter to Gale Norton, U.S. Department of Interior secretary, Gangerke said the Missouri River Natural Resources Committee (of which he is president) supports the recommendations contained in the biological opinion because it is sound and scientifically justified. Implementation will not only help endangered species, it will benefit many other river and reservoir fish and wildlife, which have declined since the development of the Missouri River system, Gangerke wrote.

The Corps is also bound by law to honor the Endangered Species Act. To preserve and replace the habitat that nurtures the vanishing fish and fowl, it has embraced the biological opinion. Management of water from Gavins Point Dam will likely be adjusted, even before the master manual revision is completed.

The Corps believes it can provide 99 percent of the flood-control benefits of the current system under the revised management plan. There will be no spring rise in wet years. And members of Congress are talking about establishing a reparation fund to ensure that floodplain farmers are kept whole in the event of flooding, according to Smith.

Latham's rider overturns a 10-year, science-based effort to balance the inequity in the current Missouri River management. It's disappointing to see him tow the line for special interests that have never lived up to taxpayers' investment. How much better it would be if he showed leadership by working to protect the river, environment and recreation while doing what's right for farmers and others using the Missouri.